

This week is Parshas Vayakhel-Pekudei and Parshas Hachodesh. We end the zman.

Vayakhel-Pekudei generally comes together with Parshas Hachodesh for a very simple reason. It works out this way in the calendar. But there is also a deep and basic idea which connects the two.

In Parshas Terumah and Tetzaveh we are told the details of building the Mishkon, the keilim and the bigdei kehunoh. Now we are told that Betzalel from Shevet Yehudah was a creative genius who was extremely talented, and he was charged with the actual construction of all these items. There are two types of creative individuals. There are those who make things completely on their own with their own ideas. But then there is using talent and creativity to fulfill every aspect and detail of Hashem's instructions. This is Betzalel.

In Pekudei we read how much material and wealth was donated to the Mishkon. Klal Yisroel went overboard in the amount they donated.

Throughout the parshiyos, we see Klal Yisroel going back-and-forth in their pattern of growth.

In Egypt, Klal Yisroel saw open miracles for a year straight, and finally, a gilui Shechinoh at makkas bechoros. A week later, the simple maidservant saw a loftier prophecy than Yechezkel Hanovi. At Har Sinai they received a level of prophecy one level under Moshe Rabbeinu.

But 40 days later, Klal Yisroel got nervous and went in reverse.

There is a difference between experiencing greatness and internalizing greatness. Klal Yisroel soon reverted back to the old habits and old mentalities they absorbed from the years and years of slavery in Egypt. So even after they were exposed to true ideas, they are all new and it takes a while to get them filtered down to the core of the human being. It doesn't happen quickly or easily.

Klal Yisroel made a one-day miscalculation. They panicked and their instinctual reaction for security was to go back to avodo zoro. But it wasn't just a need for security. The posuk says that the next morning, they got up to be frivolous. When you are confronted by Shechinoh, you take life very seriously. You say 'naaseh v'nishmoh' – it is an unbelievable level. Making a bris with Hashem and agreeing to be a mamleches kohanim v'goy kodosh – everything is very serious. But when Klal Yisroel go back to avodo zoro – life isn't so serious anymore. They are uninhibited.

Moshe sees this when he comes down and breaks the luchos. He calls out: 'mi l'Hashem elai' and only Shevet Levi came to his side. This was because only Shevet Levi stayed separate in Egypt and didn't conform. They weren't enslaved because they remained with limud haTorah and weren't impressed by the culture of Egypt.

The posuk in Vezos Habrocho explains why Shevet Levi were selected. They didn't complain at all the places in the midbor when Klal Yisroel rebelled against Hashem. They stayed loyal to Hashem and Moshe Rabbeinu throughout everything. But then when it came to the golden calf, there was another kind of test. Of course they didn't worship avodo zoro – they didn't have those habits and instincts from Egypt to look for security in avodo zoro. But there was another challenge to their commitment. Moshe commanded them to kill the ring-leaders who led Klal Yisroel to worship the calf – even if their own family members were among them.

This is a trial one step underneath the trial of the akeidah. They were

being asked to choose between their loyalty to Hashem and their loyalty to their family. Not as great as being asked to slaughter your only beloved son – but one step below that. They chose Hashem. Because of this personal sacrifice, Shevet Levi was selected to be the ones to serve in the Beis Hamikdosh.

So when the Beis Hamikdosh will be rebuilt again – hopefully soon – I as a member of Shevet Levi will be participating in the various functions of running the Beis Hamikdosh. Why? Because 3,500 years ago, my ancestors made the difficult choice to put Hashem over their family relationships. That determination separated us from the rest of Klal Yisroel.

Klal Yisroel were swinging back and forth in their spiritual journey. Moshe prayed for Klal Yisroel to be spared. He achieved atonement for the sin of the golden calf and came back down with the second set of luchos. But Klal Yisroel didn't regain the original level they achieved by the first set of luchos. So they are given an opportunity to make up for their eagerness to give up their gold to make the calf – by donating their wealth to building the Mishkon. Klal Yisroel readily accepted the offer and gave beyond what was necessary.

Then in Parshas Pekudei, Moshe Rabbeinu has to give a detailed accounting of how he used all the donations. But why? This is Moshe Rabbeinu! The one who did all these nissim and brought down the Torah – he is the conduit for all prophecy! But he received a lot of money. If he doesn't give a detailed accounting for all of it, there will be lingering doubts about his integrity.

Chazal explain the unusual cantillation for the words 'v'es ho'elef'. What is so exciting about this amount of silver that was used for the hooks on the pillars? They tell us that Moshe was making the calculation for all the silver he received from Klal Yisroel, and he wasn't able to account for this amount. He knew he didn't steal any money, but he became afraid that he would be suspected of embezzling it for himself. Then he looked up and saw the silver hooks on the pillars and was greatly relieved.

Moshe Rabbeinu knew that as the leader of Klal Yisroel, he needed to be completely above any suspicion. He couldn't afford that there would be any doubts about his honesty and integrity. If he couldn't make a detailed accounting, it would hamper his ability to lead effectively. Why? Certain lessons take a while before they become part of a human being. You can have a gilui Shechinoh, open miracles, maamad Har Sinai – you can see it all. But until it gets integrated, there is a danger of falling. After the sin of the golden calf, Hashem realized Klal Yisroel were not ready. They did not build themselves up internally to be ready to enter Eretz Yisroel with full trust in Hashem's providence. The only shevet who was ready was Shevet Levi – they never had the habits of Egypt ingrained in them. So Hashem decided that the nation needs another 40 years of being in the midbor – learning Torah day-in day-out, to get Egyptian habits and ways of thinking out of their system.

We are preparing for Pesach and we read Parshas Hachodesh as part of our preparation. It contains many complicated halachos which we need to master in order to keep Pesach properly. But underneath all the details, there is a very important avodah. On the night of the seder, we have to try to put our minds inside the mentality of those who were actually leaving Egypt. We have two different mitzvos on seder night. One mitzvah is to externally act out our brand new state of redemption from slavery. We recline, we drink 4 cups of wine, and have a feast. We

do everything you couldn't do as a slave. But then there is the mitzvah to experience for ourselves – in our own minds – as though we are now leaving Egypt on this night.

There is a mitzvah of shevach – praise to Hashem. This is the avodoh of Sukkos – to praise Hashem's power and His care. We praise Hashem for all the awesome miracles He wrought when He took us out of Egypt and provided for us in the midbar. On Pesach, there is the mitzvah of hodo'oh – gratitude. Hodo'oh is giving thanks for a benefit you personally received. It isn't praise for some great achievement. On Pesach, we are thanking Hashem for our personal redemption. We were redeemed – we ourselves! The Hallel we say at the seder is for being taken out of Egypt right now on the night of the seder.

There are two forms of preparation for Pesach. One is knowing how to keep Pesach, and the other is to understand deeply what yetzias mitzraim is all about. It requires putting yourself mentally in the position of a slave that is being freed. We are leaving that state of being slaves in Egypt.

All of us today can still deeply relate to this on the night of Pesach, because every generation that lives in golus means we are also somewhat trapped in the degenerate culture and warped mentality of the nations we live among. For the Jews leaving Egypt, there was a whole process of forty years to get rid of that baggage. For Jews today, we need to work on leaving behind the baggage we pick up in America, England, South Africa or anywhere else. There is a lot of baggage to get rid of if we are to become servants of Hashem exclusively. It is not as though we are becoming free from all restrictions. Pesach is not a celebration of freedom as the liberal Jews claim. We are becoming slaves to Hashem. Only the slavery to Egypt is over, and it takes a while to get rid of the mental baggage that came with it.

Klal Yisroel needed time to understand who Moshe Rabbeinu really was. He isn't just some tool of Hashem to make miracles. He is a great human being. To appreciate this greatness and not suspect him of taking donations for himself takes time and effort. Klal Yisroel saw so much gilui Shechinoh, so much reward and punishment – measure for measure – at Yam Suf. Hashem took away all the wealth Pharaoh received from Yosef because he refused to acknowledge the debt of gratitude he owed Yosef and his nation. Klal Yisroel said 'naaseh v'nishmah' at Har Sinai – incredible levels of spirituality and prophecy. But it was over a very short period of time. It wasn't integrated and filtered through deep down, and 73 days later, they made a golden calf. They hadn't gotten Egypt out of their system.

This is why we have a second sort of preparation before Pesach – not just learning hilchos Pesach about chometz and matzah and getting

answers to all kinds of complicated sheilos. That's the easy part. It's very technical. The harder part is mentally preparing yourself for actually leaving Egypt. You don't prepare for this by reading up on all kinds of intricate, fascinating commentaries on the Haggodoh. It is very simple – prepare to rid yourself of all the baggage of golus. But it is a very deep and difficult work.

I once got a call from a talmid of mine a few days before Pesach who lost his father suddenly in his fifties. It was a very sudden and tragic loss. The widow asked me: how can we experience the seder with simchah tonight with this horrible tragedy hanging over us?

I answered as follows. On Seder night we don't just decide to 'be happy'. We focus on the fact that we are being transformed. We are being taken from this lowly status of slaves and elevated beyond comprehension – to form a personal relationship with the Creator of the Universe – to be Hashem's chosen nation. It is an incredible privilege to be elevated to such a status above all the nations of the world! This overwhelming thought is what gives a Jew genuine simchah on Pesach and it should drown out any personal sorrow you are going through.

We have a very different avodah on Pesach. It requires entering the mindset of the Jewish slaves who left Egypt. It means realizing that we are being lifted and elevated to a tremendous level of closeness to Hashem and it should overwhelm us. It should drown out everything else that is going on in our lives.

Klal Yisroel went back and forth in their growth pattern. After the sin of the calf they were told to construct a Mishkan in order to rectify it. What does it mean to be a slave of Hashem? It means with all your creativity and all your genius, you have to channel it to build the Mishkan according to the exact instructions of Hashem to the finest detail.

Klal Yisroel didn't yet realize what greatness means. They can't appreciate who Moshe Rabbeinu is. In Egypt, they never experienced what living an integrated life of spiritual greatness looks like. They would have suspected Moshe of keeping some money for himself had he not provided a complete accounting of all the donations he received. Even after they physically left Egypt, Klal Yisroel needed to go through a long and difficult process of getting Egypt out of them. This is why we read about Parshas Hachodesh two weeks before Pesach – to start preparing ourselves for an unbelievable day of elevation and inspiration. Make sure you use the time of Bein Hazmanim to invest in working on this difficult avodah – of getting rid of our baggage of golus and becoming exclusively slaves of Hashem who are worthy of redemption.